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Heavy Nothings in Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens"

Mathilde La Cassagnère

1 In her programmatic 1919 essay *Modern Fiction*, Virginia Woolf announced her intention of revolutionising the art of fiction by attuning it to each and every impact of the world on the consciousness, however fleeting and evanescent each impact might be: "The mind receives [...] an incessant shower of innumerable atoms [...]. Let us trace the pattern [...] which each incident scores upon the consciousness" (*The Common Reader*, 150). The purpose was to emancipate fiction from its conventional modes of representation so as to make it able to capture and voice all things infinitesimal and intangible, in an exploration of the hitherto neglected "heavy nothing[s]"—as Shakespeare's Queen Isabella puts it in *Richard II* (2.2.32)—that set the soul trembling.

> Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small [...], what we can neither touch nor see. The point of interest lies [...] in something hitherto ignored [...], difficult for us to grasp [...]. The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all. And then, the eyes accustom themselves [...] and discern the shapes. (*TCR* 150-52)

2 The very same year, Woolf experimented with this new literary technique in her short story "Kew Gardens." This paper aims to follow the artist along the text in her deliberate "grasping" of the "commonly thought small" (or little nothings of life), but then to observe how this conscious practice led her intuitive "eyes" to "discern" some of the as yet unborn major discoveries of the later 20th century in the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis and even neuroscience—discoveries of which "Kew Gardens" can thus be considered to hold prophetic visions.

I. Mountains of nothings

3 Nothing could be more insignificant than a tiny brown snail-shell on the Gardens' soil, hidden, as we read in the opening paragraph, under the profusion of vegetal forms and textures of a flowerbed. Inconspicuous amidst a hundred flower stems and, what is

more, eclipsed by overwhelming impressionistic vibrations of light and colour and by the blinding chiaroscuro of ever-shifting shades intermittently screening it from the glaring summer sun, the shell must be empty in such a heat. Doomed to oblivion, it is nonetheless mentioned, as if in passing, together with a grey pebble and the odd water drop, forming with them an invisible triad.

4 The forgotten shell's reappearance, at the bottom of the next page, thus comes as a surprise. So does the existence and coming to life of its small inhabitant: "In the oval flower-bed the snail [...] appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them" (*A Haunted House*, 85). What is more, this is a stubborn snail with a consciousness and a will of its own: "It appeared to have a definite goal in front of it." As if it had materialized out of the thin air inside the empty shell, off it goes "labour[ing] over the crumbs of [...] earth" and among the fallen leaves. Henceforth the tiny mollusc turns into the synecdoche of a whole world, making mountains out of nothings: to him, the dry leaves trodden upon by the common run are "brown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows"; the ground is strewn with fallen petals turned to "vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture"; a forest of tree-like grass-blades "waves from root to tip"; and why won't this beanpole of an "angular green insect, who attempt[s] to cross in front of [him]," give way? "To circumvent the arched tent of a dead leaf or to breast it"? Meanwhile, "the feet of [...] human beings" are coming past (*AHH* 86), gigantic strollers oblivious to the "full life" of what they "can neither touch nor see" (*TCR* 151). The narrative then leaves the snail temporarily to his wavering, and reintroduces him two pages later as he is about to make a decision:

> The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it. Let alone the effort needed for climbing a leaf, he was doubtful whether the thin texture [...] would bear his weight; and this determined him finally to creep beneath it, for there was a point where the leaf curved high enough from the ground to admit him. (*AHH* 87-88)

5 Woolf's art reveals the "weight" and density of the snail's minute and silent consciousness, in which a leaf's apparent flatness swells and metamorphoses into a gigantic arch: "He had [...] inserted his head in the opening and was taking stock of the high brown roof and was getting used to the cool brown light" (*AHH* 88)—at which point it becomes explicit that the snail is not only the "difficult to grasp" object of the new vision advocated by the artist in her seminal essay (*TCR* 152), but also and momentarily a subject of this vision, "accustom[ing itself] and discern[ing] the shapes" under the leaf (*TCR* 152). Furthermore, it is not only "the eyes [that accustom] themselves," but the ears as well: sounds of which the human perception usually makes nothing, noises which only a miniature consciousness should perceive, become audible to us via a delicate interplay of consonances and alliterations: the crunching and susurration of a dry leaf caving in or of a petal about to break up ("vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture" *AHH* 86), the fine antennae softly feeling and delicately patting their way across filigreed surfaces ("he was doubtful whether the texture [...] when touched even by the tip of his horns would bear his weight" *AHH* 87). In this world perceived from a snail's horns, the snail is—as Jean-Jacques Lecercle observes in his own reading of the short story—a figure of the poet.[1]

II. "Being and Nothingness"

6 Beyond Virginia Woolf's deliberate realization of her program to rehabilitate the so called "nothings" of life, one might read, in this snail's journey published in 1919, a prophetic allegory—preceding it by more than 20 years—of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 existential experience in *Being and Nothingness*. Strikingly enough, Sartre's description of the "being-in-itself" as a "perfect equivalence of content to container" could be that of a snail's body (the "content") perfectly curled up in its shell (the "container") and filling it entirely: "The in-itself is full of itself; no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container" (*Being and Nothingness*, 120-21). At the beginning of "Kew gardens," "shell" and "snail" are indeed compressed in the same nominal group—a compression emphasized by the "shell-snail" paronomasia—whose complement can apply both to content and container: "the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins" (*AHH* 84). "The density of being [...] masses within it the infinity of density [and] exists in an infinite compression" (*BAN* 120): insofar as the shape of a snail's shell and of its content conjures up a hyperbolic spiral (whose curve never joins the pole around which it winds), it is indeed a figure of this "infinite compression [and density]."

7 It is, in the Sartrean existential theory, through the "ontological act" of consciousness (with which the snail of "Kew Gardens" is endowed) that the infinitely dense being-in-itself "falls towards" the "for-itself" (*BAN* 126): an act which consists in a "virtual separation," a "detachment" of the being from itself (*BAN* 124). The snail performs this virtual self-separation the second time he is mentioned, by partially slipping out of his shell (whereby content and container are partly dissociated): "the snail [...] now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell" (*AHH* 85). So doing, he surpasses the oneness and plenitude of the "in-itself" and achieves the "duality" of the "for-itself" (*BAN* 124).

8 It is through the aperture—a "crack" (*BAN* 121), a "fissure" (*BAN* 124), a "hole" (*BAN* 126)—resulting from this self-detachment or self-separation (or "decompression of being," *BAN* 121) that the Sartrean nothingness "slips in" the being (*BAN* 121). Thus, "the for-itself must be its own nothingness" (*BAN* 125). Woolf's snail functions as an allegory of the Sartrean nothingness as well, as "he insert[s] his head in the opening" (*AHH* 88) after he has decided to inch his way under the arch of the leaf. No wonder, then, if he no longer appears in the two remaining pages; he has disappeared into the "elsewhere" of nothingness: "nothingness is always an elsewhere" (*BAN* 126).

9 In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (published two years after *Being and Nothingness*), Jean-Paul Sartre rephrased the elsewhere of nothingness as "goals one seeks outside of oneself," as "projects" and "enterprises" resulting from responsible choices—as a "beyond" which is the only way to real existence:

> reality exists only in action [...]. Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions [...], nothing but a series of enterprises. Man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that [he] is realized [...]. [Man must] make his own choices, [...] it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself [...] that [he] will realize himself. (*EIAH* 36-38, 52-53)

10 The multiple routes and courses of action planned by the snail to achieve his goal, this whole series of projects and doubts weighing down upon the Lilliputian consciousness

—a consciousness fraught with the burden of a freedom which leaves him no choice but to make the decision "to creep beneath [the leaf]" (*AHH* 87)—are none other than this existential experience *avant la lettre*: outside of himself and making choices, he realizes himself. Though he may seem to be nothing, he "exists."

III. Back to nothing: a world of shades

11 Ironically, while the microscopic snail achieves its own reality and existence, the human couples that stroll past his flowerbed look like unreal giants. The mollusc's silent world contrasts with the babble of their voices, as they "talk almost incessantly" (*AHH* 86): a couple with two children is making casual conversation about the past; a slightly deranged elder man is prattling away beside his young and long-suffering help; two ladies are engaged in a strange verbal competition, throwing disconnected words at each other like empty shells, one might say (*AHH* 87); a young couple is arguing in "toneless and monotonous voices" (*AHH* 88) about the significance of a pronoun—"it"—and finally reaches the conclusion that, after all, it means everything... and nothing:

> 'What's "it"—what do you mean by "it"?'
> 'O anything—I mean—you know what I mean.' (*AHH* 88)

12 Every now and then, though, some of these words do make sense, but even when they do, they refer to unreal ghosts or bygone shadows: as Eleanor and Simon (the first couple) pass by, a fiancée lost by Simon some fifteen years ago ("I've been thinking of Lily, the woman I might have married" *AHH* 85); further back in the past, in Eleanor's recollection, an idealized ageing teacher ("twenty years ago [...]—it was so precious—the kiss of an old grey-haired woman" *AHH* 85); then, even more ancient "spirits"—some of them mere fantasies—conjured up by the elderly man hearing voices in his mild derangement and conversing with them ("He was talking about spirits—the spirits of the dead, who, according to him, were even now telling him all sorts of things" *AHH* 86). Thus, while the snail is intent on pursuing his aim and entirely future-bound, the strollers are regressing into the past of the ghosts that haunt them, so much so that they themselves are becoming insubstantial, as if they were about to evaporate: "[They] were enveloped in [...] green blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere" (*AHH* 89). In striking contrast to the snail's steadfast "labouring," they are gliding like "half-transparent" shades (*AHH* 85) and flitting about like ephemeral creatures: "[They] straggled past [...] with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zigzag flights [...]. Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular movement passed the flower-bed" (*AHH* 84, 89). While the snail's microcosm slowly whirls into existence and expands, the "zigzagging" giants are dwindling as if they were about to vanish into thin air, engulfed into a void: "[They] walked on [...] and soon diminished in size among the trees" (*AHH* 85). Even their eyes are emptying, as suggested by the powerful echo that links the last sentences of the opening and of the final paragraph—with a tell-tale variation—: in the initial paragraph, "the colour was flashed into the air above, *into the eyes of the men and women* who walk in Kew Gardens in July" (*AHH* 84, my emphasis); and in the last paragraph, "[the] flowers flashed their colours into the air" (*AHH* 89), "the eyes of the men and women" erased, so to speak, as well as their anchorage in space and time ("who walk in Kew Gardens in July").

13 Reduced to nothing as they may seem to be—especially in contrast with the snail's existential experience—these men and women are all inhabited by a force, an urge, which is the hidden, fundamental drive Freud will bring out in his 1920 crucial essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (published one year after Woolf's "Kew Gardens") and theorize, in connection with the "compulsion to repeat" (*i.e.* to repeat past experiences, unpleasant as they may be), as the "death instinct" at work in every living being:

> [this] instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life [...]. If we are to take it as a truth [...] that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that 'the aim of all life is death' and, looking backwards, that 'inanimate things existed before living ones [...]. [The] first instinct [which] came into being [was] the instinct to return to the inanimate state. (Freud XVIII: 37-38)

14 Woolf's description of the human characters in "Kew Gardens" is, one might say, a visionary evocation of this "first instinct" in both its manifestations as pointed out by Freud ("compulsion to repeat" and "inertia"). Simon and Eleanor's haunting memories of their departed are a compulsive movement backward into "an earlier state of things" which is their past, a past which is ultimately a realm of shade. Their dialogue sounds like a small *Nekyia* along which they are driven to the world of the dead which becomes their "reality":

> 'Tell me, Eleanor, d'you ever think of the past? [...] Because I've been thinking of the past. I've been thinking of Lily [...]. Do you mind my thinking of the past?'
> 'Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees [...], one's happiness, one's reality?' (*AHH* 85)

15 As for the people "huddled upon the ground" (*AHH* 89), they are lying in the shade of the trees "as if all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless" (*AHH* 89), a compelling image of the Freudian "inertia inherent in organic life."

16 In 1923 (three years after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) Freud, returning to his exploration of the "death instincts," qualified them—opposing them in his second and final theory of instincts to the "erotic instincts"—as "mute": "The death instincts are by their nature mute and [...] the clamor of life proceeds for the most part from Eros" (*The Ego and the Id*, in Freud XIX: 46). Mute as it is in Freudian theory, Thanatos, the death instinct, makes itself heard in "Kew Gardens": not only in Eleanor and Simon's *Nekyia*-like dialogue, but also in the "wordless voices" rising from the "motionless bodies." From these idle sounds, half way between speaking and humming, the hardly understandable snatches of conversation are the strange voices of Thanatos—both drowsy, fading away, and yet, for all their inertia, tense and passionate because burning with desire, that of the innermost death instinct on its way to fulfilment: "all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless [...], but their voices went wavering from them as if they were flames lolling from the thick waxen bodies of candles. [...] wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such depth of contentment, such passion of desire" (*AHH* 89).

IV. "Wordless voices": encountering the real

17 The death instinct however, whatever its power, is never at work by itself, but in conflicting and complex interplay with Eros, the life instinct within every being and even—as Freud demonstrated in his investigation of masochism and of sadism—within every instinctual impulse. "Every instinctual impulse," he will point out in *Anxiety and Instinctual Life*, "consists in similar fusions or alloys of the two classes of instincts" (Freud XXII: 104-5). The "flames lolling" from the "wordless voices" to be heard in "Kew Gardens" can thus be seen as well, in a Freudian perspective, as those of Eros: as visible or audible signs of the vibrations of unacknowledged desire flashing into consciousness, messages fraught with unutterable significance such as those Virginia Woolf saw in the fiction of James Joyce, while describing her own art: "[Mr Joyce] is concerned [...] to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, [...] lighting flashes of significance [...] so close to the quick of the mind" (*TCR* 151). Are not indeed the "lolling flames" of "Kew Gardens," in their intermittence, together with the "wavering voices"—their synaesthetic correspondence —, suggestive images of the characteristically discontinuous manifestation of the unconscious, of its "vacillation," as described by Jacques Lacan in *The Seminar XI*? "Discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon—discontinuity in which something is manifested as a vacillation" (Lacan XI: 25).

18 The disconnectedness, often the incoherence, of the characters' utterances, as they pass by the flower-bed, are as many effects of this "vacillation." They are the features through which Woolf's text positions itself on a borderline: an impossible borderline between the world of words—to which it naturally belongs—and a world beyond words, a world of nonsense and yet of reality. For the reiterated words and phrases brought into play in the characters' speeches—in the conversation about the past, the old man's monologue about the "electric battery" (*AHH* 86) to communicate with the dead, in the two elderly women's verbal game ("'he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says [...] Sugar, sugar, sugar'," *AHH* 87), in the two young people's metalingual dialogue ("'what do you mean by 'it'?," *AHH* 89)—all those are screens woven by the symbolic order to ward off the "vacillations" of an "unsignifiable"[2] real; while the very weaving of the screen, the very insistence of the linguistic signs betoken the imminence of the "vacillation," the potential advent of something unutterable. That is how the symbolic construction which is the short-story attempts to situate itself on the margin of the real, the "real" in the Lacanian sense, which is, within the human being, those intimate dimensions of experience—such as *jouissance* "which is forbidden to him who speaks as such" (*Ecrits* 319)—that remain foreclosed from the field of signs. It is "the impossible" that cannot be grasped by any symbolic articulation and thereby eludes the subject whose existence is rooted in the symbolic. The real is, in human experience, the object of "an essential encounter, an appointment to which we are always called," but which is bound to be "missed" since the real lies beyond all symbolic mediation (Lacan XI: 53-55).

19 Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens" brings into play this impossible encounter with the real. It works at making it happen in moments when words—referring to things they have actually created, to the so-called "reality" (the "little white table," the "two shilling piece," *AHH* 88)—open themselves to intrusions of the unsignifiable real, as

they load themselves with the materiality of the voice, of the "wordless"—and thus meaningless—voice that enunciates them. Through the voice, the real intrudes into the signs, so that the sign—or a fragment of it—is transmuted into the materiality of the "letter," as defined by Serge Leclaire in *Psychanalyser*. The "letter," Leclaire explains, is the phoneme or phonic sequence sensuously experienced which, in the "swooning moment," paradoxically "fixes and cancels *jouissance*" (Leclaire 76, 131, my translation), saving the subject from thoroughly "dying," in terms of the Elizabethan metaphor.

20 Such tentative intrusion of the real into the world of words is indeed the deeper unifying drama underlying the small and apparently disconnected dramas of the strolling couples as they walk past the flower-bed. All along the dialogues, they gradually become aware of the gap between the words they utter and an innermost real they cannot articulate. Speaking, reiterating the signs of language supposed to communicate their feelings and to refer to the world around, they come alive to the impotence of those signs, to their void; until the speakers are led to approach the signs in themselves, as nonsense, in the materiality that connects these signs to the vibrations of the voice and the movements of the body. In the dialogue between the two elderly women (just after their rambling on about "sugar, flour, kippers, greens, sugar, sugar," *AHH* 87), one of the ladies, "[coming] to a standstill opposite the oval-shaped flower-bed, [...] ceased to pretend to listen to what the other was saying. She stood there letting the words fall over her, swaying the top-part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers" (*AHH* 87): a vacillating moment in which *jouissance* ("forbidden to [her] who speaks as such"), makes itself heard "between the lines"—as Lacan further explains (*Ecrits* 319)—, or more exactly between the words in their sequence, as the woman no longer perceives them in their referential function, but as a "body" of sound at one with the motions of her own "body," in a dance-like moment of being.

21 Therefore, at this point of the short story, when the last couple but one is passing the flower-bed, it is basically the experience of poetic listening which is brought into play: listening to the poem as that borderline world lying between the symbolic and the real. Such poetic listening to the words, adumbrated in the description of the elderly woman's moment of being, is fulfilled in the drama of the pageant's last couple, the "young man" and the "young woman"—in the utterance, the audition and the resonance of the words they exchange:

> 'Lucky it isn't Friday,' he observed.
> 'Why? D'you believe in luck?'
> 'They make you pay sixpence on Friday.'
> 'What's sixpence anyway? Isn't it worth sixpence?'
> 'What's "it"—what do you mean by "it"?'
> "O, anything—I mean—you know what I mean." (*AHH* 88)

22 The dialogue is indeed an ambiguous piece: beyond manifest colloquialism it might be as well, especially to the early 20th century reader, the fragment of some modern poem (why not, for example, one of those fragmentary dialogues inserted within T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*?); an ambiguous ring which subtly conditions our reading, preparing us to hear the words in their full potential, as the two young people will do. In that initiatory moment, they waver between utterances and "long pauses [that] came between each of those remarks" (*AHH* 88), divided between what they say as topics of speech and their sense of an underlying intimate real, utterly foreign to the meaning of their words, "words with short wings [...], inadequate to carry them far and thus

alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them" (*AHH* 88). And then, in the very dialogue, a word—maybe the plainest word of language—, "it," is taken in isolation, out of all meaningful context and thus turns, as a sheer body of sound, into a thing of infinite potentialities (and one may incidentally wonder whether its phonic closeness to *id* is a mere accident):

> 'What's "it"—what do you mean by "it"?'
> 'O, anything—I mean—you know what I mean.'

23 In such new listening, the very sign, "the word with short wings," may turn into something else, even into a "heavy body of meaning"; but a "meaning" fundamentally other than that in the symbolic order, since it is precisely—and literally—a "body" which (psychoanalysis tells us) is the locus of *jouissance.* The real, then, in this final phase of the pageant, is in the interplay between "him and her": it is in what "he" feels as he listens to "her" voice: "something loom[ing] up behind her words" (*AHH* 88); and it is in the "precipices [...] concealed in [his words]" that "she" senses (*AHH* 88). So that she, forgetting her tea, "wish[es] to go down there and down there" (*AHH* 89). "Down there": the wide horizontal areas of silence that spread at first around the words in the unreal dialogue ("the long pauses [that] came between each of these remarks") finally turn into the depths of a real opening up within the very words—in the bodies of words which are in secret relation with the body of the speaking or listening subject. "Language," as Lacan observed, "is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but a body it is. Words are trapped in all the corporeal images that captivate the subject" (*Ecrits* 87).[3] Such is the initiation reached at the end of the pageant of figures passing by the flower-bed. And the narrative of this initiation is as well an implicit metalanguage in which Virginia Woolf's text projects an image of its own reading, and hints at the ways one may listen to its "wordless voices."

V. The murmurs of the brain

24 It is true, of course, that seen in a different light, such indulgence in "wordless voices"—in common parlance, "hearing voices"—customarily arouses suspicions of madness, as it does in the two women when they catch sight of the old flower-whisperer:

> Following [the old man's] steps so closely as to be slightly puzzled by his gestures came two elderly women [...]. Like most people [...] they were frankly fascinated by any signs of eccentricity betokening a disordered brain [...]; but they were too far off to be certain whether his gestures were merely eccentric or genuinely mad. (*AHH* 87)

25 But paradoxical though it may seem to be, this "eccentricity"—literally an apparent incapacity to *centre* on anything—is an "act of attention" in terms of neuroscience. It seems indeed as though the "disordered brain" of the elderly man strolling in Kew Gardens were a prophetic illustration of the (Miltonic) "pandemonium" of the *normal* human brain nowadays observed in neurology—as explained in J. Lehrer's *Proust was a Neuroscientist*:

> Experiment after experiment has shown that [...] the permanent-seeming self is actually an endless procession of disjointed moments [...]. The head holds a raucous parliament of [firing neurons] that endlessly debate what sensations and feelings should become conscious. As [...] Daniel Dennett wrote [in *Consciousness Explained*], our mind is made up of 'multiple channels [which] try, in parallel pandemoniums,

> to do their various things creating multiple drafts as they go' [Dennett 253-54]. What we call reality is merely the final draft. (Of course the very next moment requires a whole new manuscript.) [...] Why does the self feel whole when it is really broken? (Lehrer 177, 179)

26 To answer this question, Lehrer devotes several pages to *To the Lighthouse* where we learn that in the dinner scene, Mrs Ramsay's drifting into a reverie in front of a bowl of fruit (an episode we may compare with the elderly man's day-dream in front of the flower) exemplifies the "act of attention" via which "Woolf realized that the self emerges" from the neuronal "pandemonium," having chosen a "draft" or "manuscript" which will "explain away" the confusion, "weave [it] into a neat narrative," and give the self a "feeling of unity" (Lehrer 179-81):

> Whenever we pay attention to a specific stimulus—like a pear on a dinner table—we increase the sensitivity of our neurons. These cells can now see what they would otherwise ignore [...], as the lighthouse of attention selectively increases the neurons it illuminates. Once these neurons become excited, they bind themselves together into a temporary "coalition" which enters the stream of consciousness. (Lehrer 183)

27 It is when we choose one script among this mess of drafts that the nothings we would "otherwise ignore" are "illuminated" by "the lighthouse of [our] attention." And every now and then, the light of attention on the stimulus is so intense, the "feeling of unity" so strong—as in contemplative reminiscing, or poetic listening or composition—that "the self transforms ephemeral sensations into 'a moment of being'" (Lehrer 182). Trifles like a shoe-buckle, a dragon-fly, a fleeting kiss, a flower, a flock of words, a snail, all become tell-tale in the literal sense: the alchemy of our encounter with them results in the manuscript—the "fiction"—of who we are, in the narrative-driven self pressured by excited and firing neurons to "invent itself" (Lehrer 174). "Just as a novelist creates a narrative, a person creates a sense of being. The self is [...] a fiction created by the brain in order to make sense of its own disunity. [...] If [the self] didn't exist, then nothing would exist. We would be a brain full of characters, hopelessly searching for an author" (Lehrer 182). Modern neuroscience is thus coming to terms with a poignant and beautiful paradox: it is upon a fiction—the "illusory self" (Lehrer 183), this "mental confabulation" (Lehrer 180)—, upon these nothings which we voice in our tales, that our reality depends, a paradox of which Woolf, the artist, was already aware a century ago: "Although [Woolf] set out to [...] prove that we were nothing but a fleeting 'wedge of darkness', she actually discovered the self's stubborn reality [...]. Woolf wanted us to see both sides of our being, how we are 'a thing that you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses'" (Lehrer 180-81).

28 As for the nightingale and mermaids overheard in a flower by the elderly man halfway through "Kew Gardens," the "stubborn reality" of their songs is revealed when one realizes that they were actually in preparation from the very first sentence of the text, silently rehearsed by the flowers, already emanating from their "throats": "there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves [...] and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals [...] and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar" (*AHH* 84). Shooting from flowers' "tongues," seen up-close from an inebriated bee's eye-view, pistils spring indeed from this many-hued choir like the inaugural "bars"—in the musical sense—of a ballad unheard by the weary and insensitive listener. But should one, in an act of attention, stop and turn a fresh ear to this riot of colours, the silence is illuminated and becomes

audible; this is the secret told to the attentive reader in the story's final paragraph: "Voices, yes, voices, wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with, [...] in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise; breaking the silence? But there was no silence" (*AHH* 89). No silence indeed, but a modernist version of the music of the spheres sung in counterpoint by the city voices, a harmony of embedded urban structures in perpetual rotation: "all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured" (*AHH* 89). A murmuring city which is itself a modernist prophecy of our contemporary "murmuring brain": "[In 1981,] for the first time science had to confront the idea that consciousness emerged from the murmurings of the whole brain and not from just one of its innumerable parts" (Lehrer 179). The background noise of the urban-brain machinery thus turns into a harmony, and then breaks forth into song from its smallest to its vastest sphere—in the microcosm of a thrush's impending musical whistle, in the soulful tune hummed in the sky by a distant plane: "the thrush chose to hop, like a mechanical bird, in the shadow of the flowers, [...] and in the drone of the aeroplane the voice of the summer sky murmured its fierce soul" (*AHH* 89). This closing paragraph is actually an amplified repeat of the text's overture. In the overture, cupolas of greenery were played *piano*: "[the light] spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the [...] leaves" (*AHH* 84). Whereas in the finale, the vast domes of the Gardens' palm house, compared to a crowd of huge green umbrellas opening in unison in the sun, are played *forte*: "the glass roofs of the palm house shone as if a whole market full of shining green umbrellas had opened in the sun" (*AHH* 89). Then, in the ultimate couple of lines, all the voices of Kew Gardens and the city join in a final chord—an intense synaesthetic moment: "the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air" (*AHH* 89).[4]

Conclusion: the spiralling text

29 Truly enough, the snail—who has completely disappeared—seems to be excluded from this grand finale (has the thrush eaten him?); unless one listens to the piece even more attentively to perceive its subtlest choruses. Just like some paintings by the Delaunays, the story's composition is spiral-shaped due to its regular return—albeit with a modulation each time—to the shimmering trio of colours red, blue and yellow, whose shades, tones and arrangements vary according to the light, with every surface alteration, at every shift in point of view, and at the least syntactic play: "red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour" (*AHH* 84); "the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat [...] rough with gold dust" (*AHH* 84); "such intensity of red, blue and yellow" (*AHH* 84); "[the] shell [...] stained red, blue and yellow" (*AHH* 85); "yellow and black, pink and snow white" (*AHH* 89); "the breadth of yellow [...] upon the grass"; "the yellow and green atmosphere, stain[ed] faintly with red and blue" (*AHH* 89). Furthermore, the narrative coils around its starting point—the oval flower-bed—with a slight displacement at each loop: to begin, "From the oval-shaped flower-bed" (*AHH* 84); then "past the flower-bed" (*AHH* 84, 85); and again "in the oval flower-bed" (*AHH* 85), "past the bed" (*AHH* 86), "opposite the oval-shaped flower-bed" (*AHH* 87), "on the edge of the flower-bed" (*AHH* 88), "past the flower bed" (*AHH* 89). Could the never-ending spiral of the text *be* that of the snail's shell and body? As the story comes to a close, it seems as though the snail and the text have merged: this slow, dense text coils upon itself in the

compact short story format just like a snail's flesh in its shell. Although there seems to be nothing left of him in the last two pages of the narrative, the persevering snail has become the entire short-story. If he is nowhere to be found (as a word), it is because he *is* the short story's body of words:[5] is not language indeed "corporeal," a "subtle body" (*Ecrits* 87)? The snail is all the story's spectacularly divergent tales about nothings—mountains made of nothings, the Sartrean dialectic of being and nothingness, the return to the nothing of Freud's death instinct, the Lacanian impossible real, the "dying" of *jouissance*, the illusions of the brain—coiled up and woven together into a "neat narrative" (Lehrer 179). But he is also the whole body of the story's diverging and contradictory interpretations, as many "neat narratives" produced by countless readers and critics on whom it keeps impressing itself in their impossible quest for its centre. As a metaphor for how our illusory selves "instinctively explain away our divisions [and] innate contradictions" (Lehrer 179-80), Woolf's tell-tale snail, and the hyperbolic spiral of its shell, are this constricted and yet infinitely open text.

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NOTES

1. Even though this paper does not intend to recapitulate the huge body of critical literature inspired by this famous story, Lecercle's recent interpretation is worth mentioning for it is one of a few to give pride of place to the Lilliputian character, stating indeed that "the hero of the short-story is the poet snail, with his 'snail horn perception'" (Lecercle 183, my translation). Here, the critic is quoting one of Keats's letters to the painter Haydon, in which the poet conveys "the innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of beauty."

2. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva, describing the melancholic person's "loss of all interest in words" (3), shows that it is due to a fixation on a lost "unsignifiable Thing" (51), which estranges the person from all named object of desire.

3. This was probably a matter of survival to an artist whose depressive episodes drained her of physical energy. Her salvation must have consisted in embodying herself in written language, as suggested in this 1919 entry of her *Diary* (the year when "Kew Gardens" was published), which expresses her vital need, after having been bed-ridden a fortnight, for daily contact with language as a material, with its textures, its wood-like grain, the smell of its components: "the habit of writing is good practice [...]. It loosens the ligaments [...]. I must [...] lay hands on words. Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything [...]. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk [...]. I should like to come back [...] and find that [it] had [...] refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light [...] and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art" (*A Writer's Diary*, 13).

4. For an alternative listening of the text's music, see Lecercle 180-81.

5. A conclusion reached by J. J. Lecercle as well, but via a different path taken through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in *The Visible and the Invisible* (of which Lecercle considers Woolf's snail to be a prophetic embodiment): "the snail's flesh is also the flesh of the short story. Flesh turns into language" (Lecercle 187, my translation).

ABSTRACTS

Dans la nouvelle « Kew Gardens », des couples passent à proximité d'un parterre de fleurs où évolue un invisible escargot. Hantés par des fantômes qui n'ont rien de réel, ils semblent mus par la « pulsion de mort » (telle que Freud va la décrire), alors que l'insignifiant mollusque, se traînant au milieu de miettes de terre et de feuilles, se fait la synecdoque de tout un monde, voire l'allégorie prophétique de « l'être » sartrien. Cependant, des « voix sans mots » sortent de la bouche des promeneurs alors qu'ils font enfin l'expérience de la réalité du monde. Dans ces « moments of being », les mots confrontés au poids du Réel (au sens lacanien) ne sont rien, sont sans consistance. Est-ce là un aveu d'impuissance de la part de l'écrivain dont l'art n'a rien à dire ? Bien au contraire, en ne signifiant rien qu'eux-mêmes, les mots de « Kew Gardens » deviennent

finalement réalité — réalité paradoxalement née de ce que les neurologues appellent les « fictions du cerveau » —, générant ainsi une lecture poétique du texte. Les mots s'enroulent dans la circularité de la nouvelle, telle la chair de l'escargot dans sa coquille ; et du lent enroulement de leur palette musicale s'élèvent les voix de ce qui jusque-là n'était rien.

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